

## ON THE STUDY OF QUALITY OF CARE

*The Definition of Quality and Approaches to Its Assessment.* Avedis Donabedian (Volume I: Explorations in Quality Assessment and Monitoring). Ann Arbor: Health Administration Press, 1980. 176 pp. \$17.95 cloth; \$12.95 paper

The last 20 years have witnessed a virtual explosion in the number and types of studies done to assess the quality of medical care. Some studies assess care given to hospitalized patients; others examine care in the nursing home, emergency room, or ambulatory setting. Some track the general level of quality of care provided to a population enrolled in a prepaid group practice; others trace care given to people with specific diseases, such as anemia or hypertension, who happen to set foot inside a particular health care facility. Some investigations use data from insurance claims to investigate the quality of care; others base assessments on review of medical records or on interviews with patients. Some analyses use structural criteria to evaluate quality of care; others employ process and/or outcome criteria.

What most of these studies have in common, apart from good intentions and hard work, is an individualistic, nongeneralizable element: they are based on 100 patients here or 10 patients there, on several conditions in one hospital in one part of the country, or on a large number of patients who have a single illness. What is missing from this literature is a unifying theory of the definition and measurement of quality of care. In the absence of an epidemiology of deficiencies in the quality of medical care, and in the absence of nationally generalizable data about quality, we are left with pieces of a gray-toned jigsaw puzzle that purports to represent an entire rainbow.

Throughout this period, there has been one person whose constant mission has been, not to add yet another piece to the puzzle, but rather to put the puzzle together in a manner that would allow us to develop the first principles of a theory and an epidemiology of the quality of medical care. That man, of course, is Avedis Donabedian, and as the preface to his new book makes clear, he will continue to elaborate a framework for the field of quality-of-care assessment that can confidently be expected to serve us well in the years ahead.

The motivation for this book—the first in a series exploring quality assessment and monitoring—was the author's belief (in which we concur) that the time was right for a "review of the situation" (the state of the art of quality assessment) "by one scholar who was familiar with the field, but who was also willing to begin with an open mind and to take all the

time that would be needed to separate the unsound from the wholesome, and to construct out of the latter a uniform and inclusive structure." An awesome and unenviable task and, in the main, admirably done by Professor Donabedian in this slim volume. We are indebted to him for his scholarship, insight, grace, and wit.

*The Definition of Quality and Approaches to Its Assessment* is divided into three parts. The first part is a conceptual exploration of the quality of medical care. The author reaffirms its two main domains as technical and interpersonal, and explores three perspectives on a definition of quality: absolutist, individualized, and social. The second part is a critical summary of empirical studies bearing on "client" and "provider" definitions of the quality of care. The third part deals with the trilogy of assessment approaches (which he coined years ago)—structure, process, and outcome—and possible alternatives or elaborations of that formulation. Based on long experience and thought, the author has also provided four detailed lists of the elements of structure, process, and outcome that the reader might adapt for his or her own particular quality-of-care assessment tasks. The references date to the late 1970s, and include several citations to older, unfamiliar works that even today extend our understanding of the field. The author and subject indexes are notable for their detail.

But these useful elements of the book are not its best feature. Rather, in a clear and logical presentation, analyzing both the conceptual literature (a large part of which he wrote) and significant empirical studies relating to the measurement of quality, Professor Donabedian manages to raise all the pertinent issues regarding the definition of quality. In so doing, he adds greatly to our knowledge of how quality should be measured.

This work is a unique contribution to the medical care field, in part because it represents the distillation of a tremendous amount of knowledge about subjects that heretofore have been enmeshed in emotion and opinion. The arguments in the book are drawn with sensitivity and precision, and the author's conclusions are systematically tested against information that is available in the field. It is a standard against which other works can be judged, and it should become required reading for any student in the health services and medical care fields. Any health care provider wishing to claim more than a nodding acquaintance with quality-of-care issues should read this book.

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